

RECORD KEEPING | Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra: Tchaikovsky/Dvořák (Reference Recordings) - Musical Toronto

By [Paul E. Robinson](#) on May 1, 2016

Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra and Manfred Honeck don't hide the passion in a new recording of Tchaikovsky Symphony No. 6 and Dvořák's Rusalka Fantasy.



Tchaikovsky: Symphony No. 6 & Dvořák: Rusalka Fantasy

Tchaikovsky: Symphony No. 6 in b minor Op. 74 “Pathétique”. Dvořák (arr.Honeck/Ille): Rusalka Fantasy. Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra/Manfred Honeck. Reference Recordings FR-720SACD. Total Time: 67.03.

The notes Conductor Manfred Honeck writes for his own recordings often provide useful insights into what he is trying to achieve in his performances. His approach to the Tchaikovsky *Pathétique* Symphony, for example, comes across as cautionary, as he explicitly warns (himself) against “exaggeration, excessiveness and impatience.”

It has become somewhat fashionable these days to complain about performers who put too much

emotion into the music they are playing, especially music by composers such as Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninov. “Just play the music,” contemporary scolds might say, and ‘let it speak for itself.’ I think not. There is a lot of music into which composers pour their heart and soul, doing their best to translate that passion into “notes” on a page. After that, surely it is up to the performer to recreate the “sound” of that passion.

Is it “exaggeration” to play Tchaikovsky with the utmost commitment and emotion? Is it “excessiveness” to give Tchaikovsky the full range of his own dynamics from *pppppp* to *ffff*? I don’t think so.

Fortunately, Honeck doesn’t follow his own advice and with his stellar Pittsburgh players gives us a fully inflected rendition of the *Pathétique*. He has the strings of the Pittsburgh Symphony often sounding like the Vienna Philharmonic – Honeck was a violinist in the Vienna Philharmonic in his younger days – and the power of the orchestra is a fearsome thing to behold in the great climaxes. This is an excellent performance, beautifully captured by the Reference Recordings production team from Soundmirror in Boston. For an even more vivid realisation of the piece, I would refer interested listeners to Claudio Abbado’s hair-raising performance with the Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra, given at the Lucerne Easter Festival in March 2010 ([Accentus Music DVD ACC 20101](#)).

Dvorak’s opera *Rusalka* contains some of the finest music the composer ever wrote; unfortunately, with the exception of the well-known “Song to the Moon” aria, this music rarely makes its way into the concert hall. As a “filler” for this new CD, Maestro Honeck and composer Tomáš Ille put together a suite from *Rusalka*, which opens with some rambunctious dance music from Act II and includes a beautiful version of the “Song to the Moon” with a solo violin (Noah Bendix-Balgley) taking the soprano part. Again, the sound and style of the playing suggest Vienna or Prague rather than Pittsburgh.

I urge listeners who are not familiar with the opera, to get their hands on a recording of Dvořák’s *Rusalka* with Charles Mackerras leading the Vienna Philharmonic with Renée Fleming and Ben Heppner heading a fine cast. In my opinion, this is the only recording that does this *Rusalka* justice. The final duet, surely one of Heppner’s finest performances, will break your heart.

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